

Michelle M. Wright, *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* (University of Minnesota Press, 2015)

The reality of a persistently and often violently racial(ised) contemporary politics and discourse has illuminated continued global inequalities and injustices, undermining the notion of a post-racial twenty-first century. In academia, the concomitant revival of anti-imperialist and anti-racist theory and pedagogy as a societal transformation imperative has precipitated widespread renewed interest and scholarship in institutions of Higher Learning in that discipline broadly defined as Black/ blackness studies. Efforts herein to retrieve and reposition in the global imagination the quantitative substance and value of blackness are necessary. But the inverse temptation for a counter politics premised on a nativist, Afrocentric or Pan-Africanist approach – on progress narratives based on the ‘return’ to an idealised, originary past – risks fomenting a heteronormative ideology that does not account for the qualitatively multiple constituents and dimensions of this racially-identified and historically-connected collective.

The call, then, in Michelle Wright’s *Physics of Blackness: Beyond the Middle Passage Epistemology* for new ‘definitions of Blackness that do not exclude, isolate, or stigmatize’ (5) is a bold, urgent, and necessary injunction for more representative and inclusive philosophies of blackness. Noting the ‘increasing proliferation of diverse Black communities of individuals whose histories and current statuses as “hyphenated” Black identities across the globe’ (5) defy definitive categorisation, Wright’s thesis disrupts the typically accepted ways in which black people (are said to) inhabit and know the world by offering a provocatively refreshing, revisionary approach to traditional, canonical studies of blackness across the diaspora.

Observing that most discourses on blackness in the United States and in the Caribbean are located in the history of the Middle Passage, linking black cultural practices and expressions, politics and social sensibilities historically to the ‘experience of slavery in the Americas and the struggle to achieve full human suffrage in the West’ (7), Wright accedes the quantitative functional relevance in global postwar moments of this formative causal Middle Passage epistemology which delineates black shared experience and progress through ‘a direct connection to the etiology that first defines and necessarily frames that collective’ (73). But Wright finds inaccurate and inadequate this epistemology’s workings within and through the parameters of an established and predictable linear spacetime; informed by (mis)translations in the humanities of classical physics’ Newtonian quantum theory, this epistemology deploys a methodical, sanitised linear progress narrative that elides the diversity, intricacy and mutability of blackness.

Physics of Blackness argues convincingly for a reframing of the black epistemological narrative to acknowledge ‘Epiphenomenal time’, a combined constructivist and phenomenological reading of blackness that operates within a spacetime which does not preclude in the subjective process any and all causal relations but articulates one of the current moment, the “now” through which the past, present, and future are always interpreted’ (4). That is, contrary to traditionally prescriptive and restrictive depictions of blackness, Wright defines blackness as ‘the *intersection* of constructs that locate the Black collective in *history* and in the *specific moment* in which Blackness is being imagined – the “now” through which all imaginings of Blackness will be mediated’ (14). This spatiotemporal reconfiguration of being

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black in space and time as a fundamentally existential and experiential phenomenon thus advocates a context-responsive appreciation of blackness predicated qualitatively on ‘when and where it is being imagined, defined, and performed’ (3).

The danger of ‘qualitative collapse’, the collapse ‘of meaningful, layered, rich, and nuanced interpellations’ (142) of blackness that occurs in linear spacetime interpretations is revealed in what is typically engendered: vertically aligned and hierarchically realised paradigms that maintain a gendered, heteropatriarchal status quo and risk perpetuating intraracial exclusions. In a reading of W.E B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk*, Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s *The Signifying Monkey* and Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic*, chapter one of *Physics of Blackness* illuminates the masculine, androcentric character of established black (diasporic) Middle Passage philosophies. Chapter two extends to the diaspora an interrogation of the Middle Passage epistemology by foregrounding the ‘problem of return’ in literature and criticism for blacks outside of Africa. Focusing on James Baldwin’s collection of essays, *Notes of a Native Son*, chapter three explores the at times flawed and limited intersectional multidimensionality of blackness realised through the cosmopolitan encounter. Entitled ‘Axes of Asymmetry’, chapter four reveals how the quantitative richness of a post-World War (II) epistemology is consistently thwarted by moments of qualitative superficiality that denies its varied geographical and demographic breadth.

Maintaining that the only way to produce a definition of blackness that is ‘wholly inclusive and nonheirarchical’ (14) is through an appreciation of the horizontally interpellative and intersectional dimensionalities that preclude the perpetuation of exclusionary hierarchies of blackness, *Physics of Blackness* attempts to avert the ‘qualitative collapse’ inherent in linear spacetime interpretations. In this regard, Wright’s thesis simultaneously and necessarily provides instructive realignments and feminist (re)readings of ‘history’. From the nineteenth-century narrative of Mary Seacole, the speculative fiction of Octavia Butler and the transatlantic and transnational perspective of Ama Ata Aidoo, to the important critical essays of Hortense Spillers and Saidiya Hartman for example, Wright revisits and revisions traditional narratives and philosophies of blackness to specifically include historically marginalised and intricate contributions and voices of women across the black diaspora.

Physics of Blackness is evidently influenced by Stuart Hall’s ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’,¹ but revivifies this seminal essay in its configuration of the physics or mechanics of ethnicity through Epiphenominal (re)interpretations that denote ‘the full multiplicity of the dimensionalities’ of blackness created in the moment (49). Committed to underscoring the profound globality of blackness, ‘its location in so many spacetimes across the world and historical eras’ (114), Wright provides a model for delineating blackness across the diaspora that locates and corrects common exclusionary narratives and pedagogy. Its appeal to philosophical, literary, cultural and diasporic studies is apparent; but while contributing significantly to, and grounded in, the humanities, *Physics of Blackness* is not restricted to it. Its redeployment of analytical categories informs an innovative, interdisciplinary approach that necessarily

¹ Hall, Stuart. “Cultural Identity and Diaspora.” In *Identity*, edited by J. Rutherford, 227-37. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1993.

reinvigorates and enhances generally academic and societally transformative pursuits for future-oriented, inclusive and nonhierarchical understandings of not just black, but all, racial(ised) ontologies.

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